WRITING THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The executive summary, also known as the project summary or abstract, is a brief overview of the proposed project. It should include the research objectives, a concise description of the research plan, and information on expected outcomes. In addition, the summary should include information on the importance of the project, and why the research is innovative. However, avoid including proprietary information as this portion of the proposal may be posted on a website by the funding agency.

Be sure to respond to specific agency or solicitation requirements. For example, executive summaries for National Science Foundation proposals must specifically address the intellectual merit and broader impacts of the research. Using the specific headings in the summary that proposal guidelines require will ensure that reviewers quickly find the information they are seeking and give you credit for including it.

A well-written summary explains why the project is a good fit for the agency. Keep funding priorities in mind. For example, NSF seeks research proposals that are transformational and interdisciplinary; one of NIH’s priorities is translational research; and other agencies will have their own stated priorities that you must address. Describe how your proposal is in line with agency priorities, echoing the same language used in the program announcement.

The executive summary is normally written in the third person and is expected to be understandable to a scientifically or technically literate lay reader. One tip: Write the summary last, after the project description/research plan is finished. This ensures that the executive summary clearly describes the proposed work but does not include work that may have been edited out of previous drafts.